

Remarks Following a Meeting on Mine Safety

April 15, 2010

Good morning, everybody. On April 5th, the United States suffered the worst mine disaster in more than a generation. Twenty-nine lives were lost. Families have been devastated; communities have been upended. And during this painful time, all of us are mourning with the people of Montcoal and Whitesville and Naoma and the Coal River Valley. The people of West Virginia are in our prayers.

But we owe them more than prayers. We owe them action. We owe them accountability. We owe them an assurance that when they go to work every day, when they enter that dark mine, they are not alone. They ought to know that behind them there is a company that's doing what it takes to protect them and a Government that is looking out for their safety.

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, I asked the officials standing with me, Labor Secretary Hilda Solis and Joe Main and Kevin Stricklin with the Mine Safety and Health Administration, to lead an investigation into what caused the explosion at Massey Energy Company's Upper Big Branch mine. I asked them to report back with preliminary findings this week.

We just concluded a meeting where they briefed me on their investigation. I want to emphasize that this investigation is ongoing and there's still a lot that we don't know. But we do know that this tragedy was triggered by a failure at the Upper Big Branch mine, a failure first and foremost of management, but also a failure of oversight and a failure of laws so riddled with loopholes that they allow unsafe conditions to continue.

So today I've directed Secretary Solis, Assistant Secretary Main, and Administrator Stricklin to work closely with State mining officials to press ahead with this investigation so we can help make sure a disaster like this never happens again. Owners responsible for conditions in the Upper Big Branch mine should be held accountable for decisions they made and preventive measures they failed to take. And I've asked Secretary Solis to work with the Justice Department to ensure that every tool in the Federal Government is available in this investigation.

But this isn't just about a single mine. It's about all of our mines. The safety record at the Massey Upper Big Branch mine was troubling. And it's clear that while there are many responsible companies, far too many mines aren't doing enough to protect their workers' safety.

And that's why yesterday Governor Manchin announced that West Virginia miners will take this Friday off from coal production so they can mourn their loss, but also reevaluate safety procedures. He also called for additional inspections in West Virginia mines. The Federal Government is taking sweeping actions as well. Starting today we'll go back and take another look at mines across this country with troubling safety records and get inspectors into those mines immediately to ensure they aren't facing the same unsafe working conditions that led to this disaster.

Second, I've directed Secretary Solis, Assistant Secretary Main, and Administrator Stricklin to work with Congress to strengthen enforcement of existing laws and close loopholes that permit companies to shirk their responsibilities. Stronger mine safety laws were passed in

2006 after the Sago mine disaster. But safety violators like Massey have still been able to find ways to put their bottom line before the safety of their workers, filing endless appeals instead of paying fines and fixing safety problems. To help ensure that mine companies no longer use a strategy of endless litigation to evade their responsibilities, we need to tackle the backlog of cases at the Mine Safety and Health Review Commission.

And to help hold companies accountable, I've also asked Secretary Solis to streamline the rules for proving that a mining company has committed a pattern of violations so that we can empower the mine safety agency to take essential steps to keep miners safe. If a mining company consistently violates safety standards, they should be subjected to the tougher enforcement that comes with being placed on an updated pattern of violations list.

Third, we can't just hold mining companies accountable; we need to hold Washington accountable. And that's why I want to review how our Mine Safety and Health Administration operates. For a long time, the mine safety agency was stacked with former mine executives and industry players. The industry [agency]* is now run, I'm proud to say, by former miners and health safety experts like Joe Main and Kevin Stricklin. Even so, we need to take a hard look at our own practices and our own procedures to ensure that we're pursuing mine safety as relentlessly as we responsibly can. In addition, we need to make sure that miners themselves, and not just the Government or mine operators, are empowered to report any safety violations.

I think we all understand that underground coal mining is, by its very nature, dangerous. Every miner and every mining family understands this. But we know what can cause mine explosions and we know how to prevent them. I refuse to accept any number of miner deaths as simply a cost of doing business. We can't eliminate chance completely from mining any more than we can from life itself. But if a tragedy can be prevented, it must be prevented. That's the responsibility of mine operators, that's the responsibility of Government, and that is the responsibility that we're all going to have to work together to meet in the weeks and months to come.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:39 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Assistant Secretary of Labor for Mine Safety and Health Joseph A. Main; Coal Mine Safety and Health Administrator Kevin G. Stricklin; and Gov. Joseph Manchin III of West Virginia.

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* White House correction.

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